

Pornography is a left issue



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Anti-pornography feminists get used to insults from the left. Over and over we are told that we're anti-sex, prudish, simplistic, politically naïve, diversionary, and narrow-minded. The cruder critics do not hesitate to suggest that the cure for these ailments lies in, how shall we say, a robust sexual experience.

In addition to the slurs, we constantly face a question: Why do we "waste" our time on the pornography issue? Since we are anti-capitalist and anti-empire leftists as well as feminists, shouldn't we focus on the many political, economic, and ecological crises (war, poverty, global warming, etc.)? Why would we spend part of our intellectual and organizing energies over the past two decades pursuing the feminist critique of pornography and the sexual exploitation industry?

The answer is simple: We are anti-pornography precisely because we are leftists as well as feminists.

As leftists, we reject the sexism and racism that saturates contemporary mass-marketed pornography. As leftists, we reject the capitalist commodification of one of the most basic aspects of our humanity. As leftists, we reject corporate domination of media and culture. Anti-pornography feminists are not asking the left to accept a new way of looking at the world but instead are arguing for consistency in analysis and application of principles.

It has always seemed strange to us that so many on the left consistently refuse to engage in a sustained and thoughtful critique of pornography. All this is particularly unfortunate at a time when the left is flailing to find traction with the public; a critique of pornography, grounded in a radical feminist and left analysis that counters right-wing moralizing, could be part of an effective organizing strategy.

Left media analysis <>

Leftists examine mass media as one site where the dominant class attempts to create and impose definitions and explanations of the world. We know news is not neutral, that entertainment programs are more than just fun and games. These are places where ideology is reinforced, where the point of view of the powerful is articulated. That process is always a struggle; attempts to define the world by dominant classes can be, and are, resisted. The term "hegemony" is typically used to describe that always-contested process, the way in which the dominant class attempts to secure control over the construction of meaning.

The feminist critique of pornography is consistent with -- and, for many of us, grows out of -- a widely accepted analysis on the left of ideology, hegemony, and media, leading to the observation that pornography is to patriarchy what commercial television is to capitalism. Yet when pornography is the topic, many on the left seem to forget Gramsci's theory of hegemony and accept the pornographer's self-serving argument that pornography is mere fantasy.

<> Apparently the commonplace left insight that mediated images can be tools for legitimizing inequality holds true for an analysis of CBS or CNN, but evaporates when the image is of a woman having a penis thrust into her throat with such force that she gags. In that case, for unexplained reasons, we aren't supposed to take pornographic representations seriously or view them as carefully constructed products within a wider system of gender, race, and class inequality. The valuable work conducted by media critics on the politics of production apparently holds no weight for pornography.

Pornography is fantasy, of a sort. Just as television cop shows that assert the inherent nobility of police and prosecutors as protectors of the people are fantasy. Just as the Horatio Alger stories about hard work's rewards in capitalism are fantasy. Just as films that cast Arabs only as terrorists are fantasy.

All those media products are critiqued by leftists precisely because the fantasy world they create is a distortion of the actual world in which we live. Police and prosecutors do sometimes seek justice, but they also enforce the rule of the powerful. Individuals in capitalism do sometimes prosper as a result of their hard work, but the system does not provide everyone who works hard with a decent living. Some tiny number of Arabs are terrorists, but that obscures both the terrorism of the powerful in white America and the humanity of the vast majority of Arabs.

Such fantasies also reflect how those in power want subordinated people to feel. Images of happy blacks on the plantations made whites feel more secure and self-righteous in their oppression of slaves. Images of contented workers allay capitalists' fears of revolution. And men deal with their complex feelings about contemporary masculinity's toxic mix of sex and aggression by seeking images of women who enjoy pain and humiliation.

Why do so many on the left seem to assume that pornographers operate in a different universe than other capitalists? Why would pornography be the only form of representation produced and distributed by corporations that wouldn't be a vehicle to legitimize inequality? Why would the pornographers be the only media capitalists who are rebels seeking to subvert hegemonic systems?

Why do the pornographers get a free ride from so much of the left?

After years of facing the left's hostility in public and print, we believe the answer is obvious: Sexual desire can constrain people's capacity for critical reason -- especially in men in patriarchy, where sex is not only about pleasure but about power.

Leftists -- especially left men -- need to get over the obsession with getting off.

Let's analyze pornography not as sex, but as media. Where would that lead?

Corporate media

Critiques of the power of commercial corporate media are ubiquitous on the left. Leftists with vastly different political projects can come together to decry conglomerates' control over news and entertainment programming. Because of the structure of the system, it's a given that these corporations create programming that meets the needs of advertisers and elites, not ordinary people.

Yet when discussing pornography, this analysis flies out the window. Listening to many on the left defend pornography, one would think the material is being made by struggling artists tirelessly working in lonely garrets to help us understand the mysteries of sexuality. Nothing could be further from the truth; the pornography industry is just that -- an industry, dominated by the pornography production companies that create the material, with mainstream corporations profiting from its distribution.

It's easy to listen in on pornographers' conversations -- they have a trade magazine, *Adult Video News*. The discussions there don't tend to focus on the transgressive potential of pornography or the polysemic nature of sexually explicit texts. It's about -- what a surprise! -- profits. The magazine's stories don't reflect a critical consciousness about much of anything, especially gender, race, and sex.

Andrew Edmond -- president and CEO of Flying Crocodile, a \$20 million pornography internet company -- put it bluntly: "A lot of people get distracted from the business model by [the sex]. It is just as sophisticated and multilayered as any other market place. We operate just like any Fortune 500 company."

The production companies -- from big players such as Larry Flynt Productions to small fly-by-night operators -- act predictably as corporations in capitalism, seeking to maximize market-share and profit. They do not consider the needs of people or the effects of their products, any more than other capitalists. Romanticizing the pornographers makes as much sense as romanticizing the executives at Viacom or Disney.

Increasingly, mainstream media corporations profit as well. Hugh Hefner and Flynt had to fight to gain respectability within the halls of capitalism, but today many of the pornography profiteers are big corporations. Through ownership of cable distribution companies and Internet services, the large companies that distribute pornography also distribute mainstream media. One example is News Corp. owned by Rupert Murdoch.

News Corp. is a major owner of DirecTV, which sells more pornographic films than Flynt. In 2000, the *New York Times* reported that nearly \$200 million a year is spent by the 8.7 million subscribers to DirecTV. Among News Corp.'s other media holdings are the Fox broadcasting and cable TV networks, Twentieth Century Fox, the New York Post, and TV

Guide. Welcome to synergy: Murdoch also owns HarperCollins, which published pornography star Jenna Jameson's best-selling book *How To Make Love Like A Porn Star*.

When Paul Thomas accepted his best-director award at the pornography industry's 2005 awards ceremony, he commented on the corporatization of the industry by joking: "I used to get paid in cash by Italians. Now I get paid with a check by a Jew." Ignoring the crude ethnic references (Thomas works primarily for Vivid, whose head is Jewish), his point was that what was once largely a mob-financed business is now just another corporate enterprise.

How do leftists feel about corporate enterprises? Do we want profit-hungry corporate executives constructing our culture?

Commodification

It's long been understood on the left that one of the most insidious aspects of capitalism is the commodification of everything. There is nothing that can't be sold in the capitalist game of endless accumulation.

◇ In pornography, the stakes are even higher; what is being commodified is crucial to our sense of self. Whatever a person's sexuality or views on sexuality, virtually everyone agrees it is an important aspect of our identity. In pornography, and in the sex industry more generally, sexuality is one more product to be packaged and sold.

When these concerns are raised, pro-pornography leftists often rush to explain that the women in pornography have chosen that work. Although any discussion of choice must take into consideration the conditions under which one chooses, we don't dispute that women do choose, and as feminists we respect that choice and try to understand it.

◇ But, to the best of our knowledge, no one on the left defends capitalist media -- or any other capitalist enterprise -- by pointing out workers consented to do their jobs. The people who produce media content, or any other product, consent to work in such enterprises, under varying constraints and opportunities. So what? The critique is not of the workers, but of the owners and structure. ◇

Look at the industry's biggest star, Jenna Jameson, who appears to control her business life. However in her book she reports that she was raped as a teenager and describes the ways in which men in her life pimped her. Her desperation for money also comes through when she tried to get a job as a stripper but looked too young -- she went into a bathroom and pulled off her braces with pliers. She also describes drug abuse and laments the many friends in the industry she lost to drugs. And this is the woman said to have the most power in the pornography industry.

As we understand left analysis, the focus isn't on individual decisions about how to survive in a system that commodifies everything and takes from us meaningful opportunities to control our lives. It's about fighting a system.

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Racism

As the most blatant and ugly forms of racism have disappeared from mainstream media, leftists have continued to point out that subtler forms of racism endure, and that their constant reproduction through media is a problem. Race matters, and media depictions of race matter.

Pornography is the one media genre in which overt racism is still acceptable. Not subtle, coded racism, but old-fashioned U.S. racism -- stereotypical representations of the black male stud, the animalistic black woman, the hot Latina, the demure Asian geisha. Pornography vendors have a special category, "interracial," which allows consumers to pursue the various combinations of racialized characters and racist scenarios.

The racism of the industry is so pervasive that it goes largely unnoticed. In an interview with the producer of the DVD "Black Bros and Asian Ho's," one of us asked if he ever was criticized for the racism of such films. He said, "No, they are very popular." We repeated the question: Popular, yes, but do people ever criticize the racism? He looked incredulous; the question apparently had never entered his mind.

Yet take a tour of a pornography shop, and it's clear that racial justice isn't central to the industry. Typical is the claim of "Black Attack Gang Bang" films: "My mission is to find the cutest white honeys to get Gang Banged by some hard pipe hitting niggas straight outta compton!" It would be interesting to see a pro-pornography leftist argue to a non-white audience that such films are unrelated to the politics of race and white supremacy.

Up-market producers such as Vivid use mainly white women; the official face of pornography is overwhelmingly white. However, alongside this genre there exists more aggressive material in which women of color appear more frequently. As one black woman in the industry told us, “This is a racist business,” from how she is treated by producers to pay differentials to the day-to-day conversations she overhears on the set.

Sexism

Contemporary mass-marketed heterosexual pornography -- the bulk of the market for sexually explicit material -- is one site where a particular meaning of sex and gender is created and circulated. Pornography’s central ideological message is not hard to discern: Women exist for the sexual pleasure of men, in whatever form men want that pleasure, no matter what the consequences for women. It’s not just that women exist for sex, but that they exist for the sex that men want.

◁Despite naïve (or disingenuous) claims about pornography as a vehicle for women’s sexual liberation, the bulk of mass-marketed pornography is incredibly sexist. From the ugly language used to describe women, to the positions of subordination, to the actual sexual practices themselves -- pornography is relentlessly misogynistic. As the industry “matures” the most popular genre of films, called “gonzo,” continues to push the limits of degradation of, and cruelty toward, women. Directors acknowledge they aren’t sure where to take it from the current level.

This misogyny is not an idiosyncratic feature of a few fringe films. Based on three studies of the content of mainstream video/DVD pornography over the past decade, we conclude that woman-hating is central to contemporary pornography. Take away every video in which a woman is called a bitch, a cunt, a slut, or a whore, and the shelves would be nearly bare. Take away every DVD in which a woman becomes the target of a man’s contempt, and there wouldn’t be much left. Mass-marketed pornography doesn’t celebrate women and their sexuality, but instead expresses contempt for women and celebrates the charge of expressing that contempt sexually.

◁Leftists typically reject crude biological explanations for inequality. But the story of gender in pornography is the story of biological determinism. A major theme in pornography is that women are different from men and enjoy pain, humiliation, degradation; they don’t deserve the same humanity as men because they are a different kind of creature. In pornography, it’s not just that women want to get fucked in degrading fashion, but that they *need* it. Pornography ultimately tells stories about where women belong -- underneath men.

Most leftists critique patriarchy and resist the system of male dominance. Gender is one of those arenas of struggle against domination, and hence an arena of ideological struggle. Put an understanding of media together with feminist arguments for sexual equality, and you get the anti-pornography argument.

The need for a consistent analysis of power

Leftists who otherwise pride themselves on analyzing systems and structures of power, can turn into extreme libertarian individualists on the subject of pornography. The sophisticated, critical thinking that underlies the best of left politics can give way to simplistic, politically naïve, and diversionary analysis that leaves far too many leftists playing cheerleader for an exploitive industry. In those analyses, we aren’t supposed to examine the culture’s ideology and how it shapes people’s perceptions of their choices, and we must ignore the conditions under which people live; it’s all about an individual’s choice.

A critique of pornography doesn’t imply that freedom rooted in an individual’s ability to choose isn’t important, but argues instead that these issues can’t be reduced to that single moment of choice of an individual. Instead, we have to ask: What is meaningful freedom within a capitalist system that is racist and sexist?

Leftists have always challenged the contention of the powerful that freedom comes in accepting one’s place in a hierarchy. Feminists have highlighted that one of the systems of power that constrains us is gender.

We contend that leftists who take feminism seriously must come to see that pornography, along with other forms of sexualized exploitation -- primarily of women, girls and boys, by men -- in capitalism is inconsistent with a world in which ordinary people can take control of their own destinies.

That is the promise of the left, of feminism, of critical race theory, of radical humanism -- of every liberatory movement in modern history.

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